

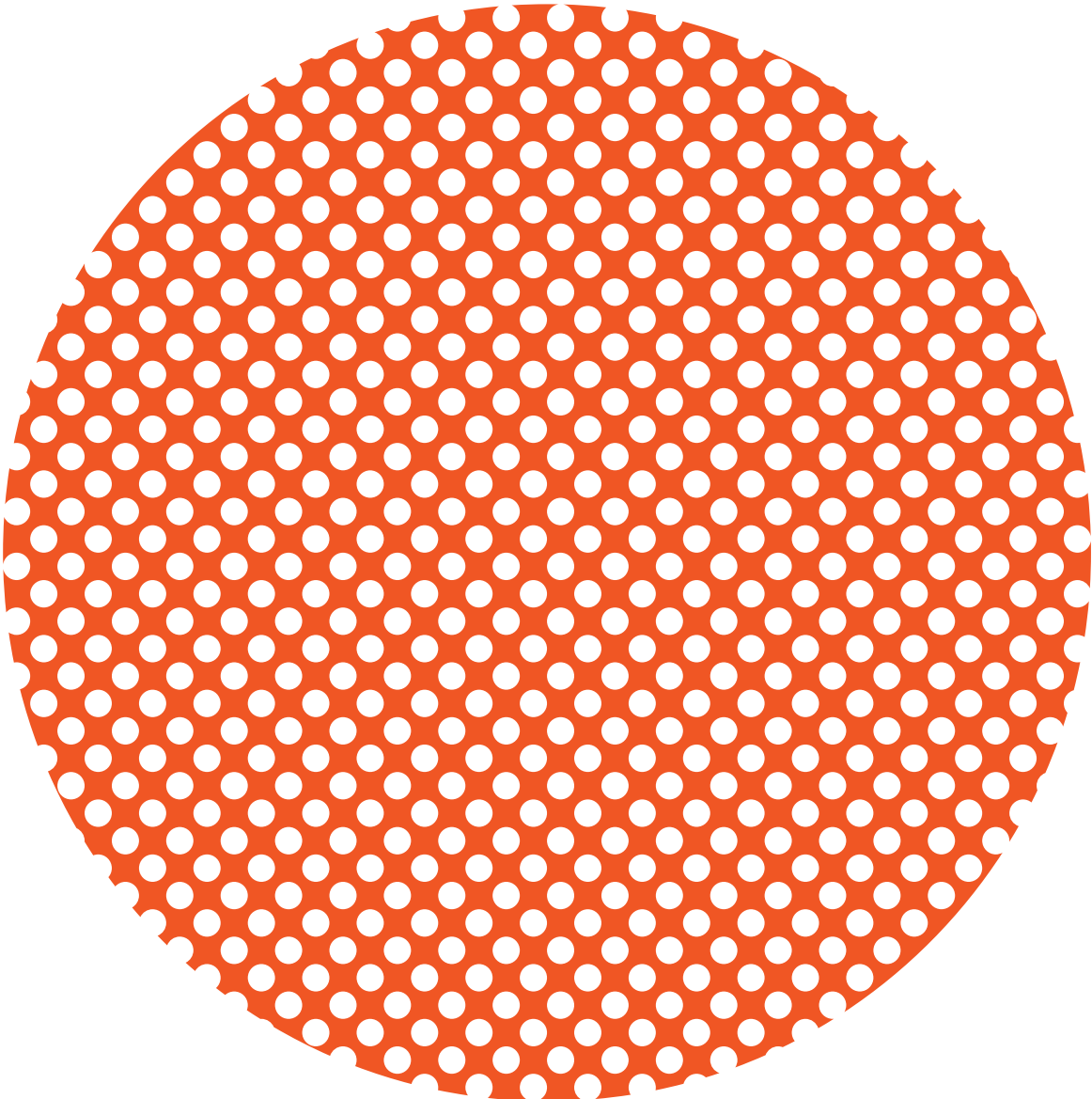
Publication



Shumka Centre for
Creative Entrepreneurship

Career Development +
Work Integrated Learning

How to Reach Out to People You Don't Know



How to Reach Out to People You Don't Know

Communicating via e-mail is an invisible, practical skill that allows projects to form, get going, and move along—this is especially important when you are reaching out to people you are talking to for the very first time.

Communication sets the tone for all future collaborative work. People that are easy to communicate with tend to be straightforward and oftentimes are the best people to work with. If communication is disjointed or awkward, it tends to create tension and can be difficult to get anything moving. Taking care of the way you first reach out is an efficient way to establish a productive working relationship with someone from the start.

When to Reach Out

There are various reasons and circumstances that would compel conversation through e-mail:

- When you are curious or want to know how something works.
- When you need help or have a specific question; when you require aid in actualizing a project.
- When you want to discuss a potential collaboration.

You can initiate a discussion about a potential collaboration in general or reach out when you have a specific opportunity in mind. An initial meeting can be as simple as meeting over coffee to hear about what people are working on.

Some Tips for First Contact by E-mail

Write a considered and specific subject line.

This helps track further conversations when you are going back to your e-mail later on.

“Hi” or “Hello” is better than “Dear Sir/Madam” or “Dear Mr./Mrs. X”.

These are too stiff and also gendered! Do not address your e-mail the same way you would address a written letter.

Keep your e-mail topic to only one thing.

Don't bombard your recipient with multiple requests, tasks or items.

Make sure your e-mail is “single screen”.

The receiver should not need to scroll through multiple pages.

State why you are reaching out or ask a direct question at the very beginning of your e-mail.

This type of technical writing is known as BLUF (bottom line up front), it helps your recipient make a fast decision. Do not force the reader to read your entire e-mail before figuring out what you need! Be straightforward within the first 1-2 paragraphs.

If e-mailing about a project, refer to your project in brief when you introduce yourself.

Include all details (any attachments, descriptions, text or information) at the very end of the e-mail. For example: “Hi, I'm Pat, I'm writing to you about my Project X (details below) and I was wondering if you can...”

Some Tips for First Contact by E-mail

If you're reaching out to someone to ask for something such as a letter of support, provide them with the longest time possible. For instance, if you need a letter by December 1st and it is currently November 5th, ask them right away, even if it seems like you have an entire month! The small steps take time—by giving it to them early, you are giving yourself time to consistently check back on them.

Pro Tip: If you need something like a letter of support in time for a granting deadline, list the deadline as a week earlier when asking that person for it. This creates a buffer and makes it less likely that you will hold up your grant application.

If Someone Introduced or Connected You

If a mutual middle person has connected you with someone they know, tell the person you are getting in contact with why you are e-mailing them and how you two have been connected. For example, if you are Shelly reaching out to Mo because Jackie told you, you can say “Hi, I’m Shelly! Jackie mentioned you because...” It’s even better if Jackie can do an email introduction between Shelly and Mo.

Pro Tip: Don’t introduce two people via e-mail unless you have asked them both whether it is okay to do that.

Always CC the person who introduced or connected you in the initial correspondence, so they know that you have reached out, but do not that person in any following e-mail. Your mutual connection does not need to be included in a conversation that does not pertain to them.

A Note on Empathy

Always think empathetically when you're connecting with someone at any point in a conversation. Consider what the other person might be going through when you send an e-mail or show up to talk to them. Ask yourself: how will hearing from you integrate with the other things they are doing, working on, or struggling with? Your initiative may come out of the blue especially if they are busy working on more urgent matters.

It's also important to note that people receive a lot of general inquiries via e-mail, chances are your e-mail is one of many that sits in your recipient's inbox. Especially with this in mind, e-mails without any context or details can become overwhelming or simply unanswerable. To avoid this pitfall, always make sure to give a clear subject line to your e-mails, briefly contextualize your ask and keep your overall e-mail as brief as possible. Your chances of getting a positive response will be much higher if you make it easier for the other person.

Grammar and Spelling Tools

Even though e-mails feel quick and informal, spelling and grammar errors can make you appear unprofessional and disorganized. There are tools and resources available online that help you check your writing to pinpoint any errors in grammar or spelling. [Grammarly](#) is an immensely useful extension that will catch and correct your spelling and grammar while you are writing on the web. It may not catch absolutely everything, but it will help you snag the big mistakes.

At Emily Carr, you can take your e-mail draft to [the Writing Centre](#) to receive help, even if it feels silly to bring something that small!

General E-mail Dos and Don'ts

Do

- Have your e-mail configured so that your full name appears. Check for any strange errors that may prevent your name from being completely legible. This is particularly important if your actual e-mail handle is different from your name.
- Give a concise subject line to your e-mails.
- Make what you are asking an easy task for the person to do, say for example “I would love to discuss possibilities of future collaboration with you, would you have time for a quick call in the next couple of weeks?” This tells them what you're looking for without being inflexible, there's room for the person to provide suggestions.
- Add an auto responder if you are going to be unable to respond for a period of time.

Don't

- Don't assume the person will know who you are or why you are writing to them right off the bat, especially if your e-mail lacks a signature or your handle is not your full name. This makes it extremely confusing for the receiver—always include all details.
- Don't expect people to read their e-mails immediately.
- Don't use a strange font, unless there is a specific reason or template you are working with. Stick with the basics!
- Don't write in an insincere or overly formal voice. If it doesn't sound like something you would say in person, don't write it!
- Don't make your e-mail very long and unclear. Try to avoid including an overwhelming amount of links.
- Don't introduce a brand new subject in the midst of a long e-mail thread. Start a new chain with a clear subject line.

General E-mail Dos and Don'ts

Do

- Be polite and accommodating to different approaches that someone may suggest. If you're thinking of doing something one way, and the other person suggests something completely different, be open to it.
- Put "Time Sensitive" in the subject line if something is urgent. Try very hard not to ask someone you don't know for something that is urgent.
- Make it super clear if you need something by a specific deadline. Express urgency by putting reminders in bold text in the body of the e-mail. This does not apply if you are getting in touch with a new person in order to set up a meeting—it brings too much detail to the table at once and puts a lot of pressure on a person you have just met.

Don't

- Don't make your problem someone else's problem, especially when you are asking for something. You do not need to include unnecessary details and appear inflexible: "It would be great if we could meet to discuss this in the next couple of weeks. Let me know if you would be free on a Wednesday at 7:30AM for a meeting in White Rock, because I have three part-time jobs and no car."
- Don't ask someone to review something complicated unless they have agreed to it. You do not want to send a term paper or novel to somebody prior to them saying they'd be happy to look at it for you.
- Don't CC a person unless it makes actual and direct sense to do so. CC-ing is excellent if somebody needs information but does not need to participate in the actual conversation—they are simply keeping the status of productivity and progress on their radar.

General E-mail Dos and Don'ts

Do

- Keep an e-mail thread intact if the conversation is continuing. Starting new subject lines every time you send out an e-mail is unnecessary unless the nature of the conversation has changed to a different subject. This makes it easier to refer back to different threads when seeking out specific information in your inbox.
- If you are trying something specific with formatting, send a test e-mail to yourself. Sometimes compositions can change from one person's screen to another.
- Check that you have added any necessary attachments.

Don't

- Don't introduce two people by e-mail if you haven't asked both parties whether they want to be introduced. If they have agreed, always give a one line context for each of them about why you are introducing them, so that it is easier for them to remember why they are meeting each other. You can be direct in shifting the next steps to them to continue the conversation, allowing yourself to take a step back: "Bob is an amazing organizer and Alison is developing a super interesting new project surrounding this. I'll leave it to you to connect directly."
- Don't leave people off CC who need to know about something. If you have a collaborator, always keep them in the loop, even if they're not leading correspondence. CC-ing is an exercise in efficiency, it prevents you from constantly reiterating large amounts of information.

General E-mail Dos and Don'ts

Do

- Include your contact information in your e-mail signature, including a link to your website if applicable.
- Proofread your e-mail prior to sending it.
- Gently follow up if you have not heard back from somebody for 1 week. If a person does not respond after 2-3 follow ups, let the connection drop.

Don't

- Don't attach files larger than 5MB. Instead, send a link using a service such as Dropbox, Google Drive or WeTransfer. Recognize that WeTransfer files are only valid for a week, so if the other party does not download the files right away, you will have to send the links again. When sending a Google Drive link, make sure anyone with the link has "view" or "edit" access.
- Don't substitute e-mails for meetings. If an e-mail is taking too long to write, it may be more effective to meet in person or over the phone. Video chat services such as Zoom and Skype allow you to video call directly. E-mail is not the only way of going back and forth!

Reaching Out via Social Media

Depending on the nature of what you are trying to do or what you are asking about, establishing conversations and connections on social media platforms can also be an alternative. For example, if you're coming in with a professional relationship, e-mail is more formal and will better suit your intentions. If you're a fan of somebody's work and you already follow them on Instagram, definitely send a direct message their way! The language used here is more casual.

Some people are more active on social media than others. If they use social media often, reaching out through a Twitter or Instagram DM is a good way to spark an easy-going conversation. Keep in mind, if the person you are messaging has a large following, the chances of them seeing your messages are slim, especially if they don't follow you. Your DM will probably end up in their request box.

The same general rules for e-mails also apply to social media: always be mindful and respectful of that person and their workload.

What If You Don't Hear Back?

Do not take it personally if you don't hear back from the person right away or in the way you wanted to. They may not have had time to help you or respond, or they could be in the midst of something that is concerning all of their energy elsewhere.

Remember that the more number of participants, the longer it takes for things to move forward. Account for the amount of time it takes to get multiple individuals working together.

Having initial, face-to-face meetings before reaching out via e-mail often results in better relationships. You can send a follow-up e-mail after you have met with them. This feels more humanizing and meaningful, whereas reaching out online at times can seem blunt.

Being a Student is a Good Way to Reach Out!

Try to create connections when you're still a student. A great way to start is to reach out to people whose practice you admire or are interested in, and ask them questions regarding their work and their process. This helps you get to know the people in your field as well as broaden your ideas concerning your opportunities after you finish school. It can also assist your ability to describe your interests and spark conversations about projects that you're working on.

Take advantage of being a student and don't be afraid to mention it when you can. People tend to be more generous when you identify as a student; it gives you certain privileges that are unavailable once you graduate.

Appendix

This resource was produced to support students in the Shumka Centre's Satellite residency program in 2019, and also shared as part of the Fall 2019 Skill Up Series. Skill Ups are co-hosted and co-produced by Career Development + Work Integrated Learning Office and the Shumka Centre for Creative Entrepreneurship at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. These resources are produced with the generous support of the Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills & Training.

The Career Development + Work Integrated Learning Office connects students and alumni with local, national and international employers in the creative industries and beyond. We offer career advising, clinics and strategy sessions, drop-in and individual advising, access to work integrated learning opportunities such as co-ops and internships, co-curricular programming, and industry networking events, as well as the Arts-work career portal.

The Shumka Centre for Creative Entrepreneurship launched in 2018 to create programs and partnerships that help artists and designers realize their ideas in the world. The Centre is a place where creative practitioners can find the community, knowledge, and resources they need to launch, fund, and organize projects across the spectrum of contemporary art and design activities- products, projects, curatorial initiatives, platforms, companies, organizations, and more. We believe that tactical support specifically designed for the needs of artists and designers is the first step in achieving a systemic change to empower creative people. The Centre is operated by Living Labs.



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OF ART + DESIGN